DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 889 CS 214 953

AUTHOR Davis, Margaret H.
TITLE Staging a Pre-Emptive Strike: Turning Student Evaluation of Faculty from Threat to Asset.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Informal Assessment; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; Student Surveys; Teacher Expectations of Students; *Teacher Improvement; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Faculty Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Many college and university teachers across the United States remain hostile, at least privately, to student evaluation of faculty performance despite the general use of such evaluation in the academy for the past three decades. However, professionals can use student evaluations to their advantage if they "stage a pre-emptive strike"--in other words, if they stop viewing the evaluation process as something done to them by administrators and cynical students and begin to see it instead as something that can be done for them, something that they can do for themselves to improve the quality of their teaching. Faculty should first of all convince their students of the importance of their comments; they must explain that they will change their classroom methods and manner in accordance with their suggestions. Secondly, faculty must develop a strategy to develop an evaluation instrument that will suit their purposes. Most universities use standardized forms that do not reflect the individual contours of particular courses. The strategy that one instructor in freshman composition developed included the construction of 3 instruments, which were administered during the 4th, 8th, and 12th-weeks. The form elicits student responses in 4 areas: (1) understanding course objectives and their relevance; (2) perception of organization and presentation of material; (3) attitudes toward grading and testing; and (4) perception of the teacher. (Contains three sample survey forms.) (TB)

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ED 384 889

Margaret H. Davis

STAGINC A PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE: TURNING STUDENT EVALUATION OF FACULTY FROM THREAT TO ASSET

Many college and university teachers across the nation remain hostile, at least privately, to student evaluation of faculty performance despite the general use of such evaluation in academe for the past three decades. And, apparently, many of our students share our dissatisfaction and are convinced that evaluation is merely another pointless college activity to be completed as quickly and mindlessly as possible since no one <u>really</u> cares about their perceptions of the teaching taking place in their classrooms.

Of course, as professionals we know that university administrators widely employ student evaluation as one means for determining promotions, salary increases, and tenure decisions; therefore, these evaluations often leave us feeling understandably vulnerable and threatened. While students may lack our awareness of the role their evaluations play in our professional lives, they too are often cynical about evaluations. And sometime their cynicism is justified. For example, one of my own students recently recounted an incident from one of his classes last semester. Supposedly, when the professor belatedly realized he had received an insufficient number of forms for a required departmental evaluation, he simply passed out the forms he had, dismissed the remainder of his class, and announced that those students' responses wouldn't have been significant anyway since "I have tenure, so whatever you might have said wouldn't matter anyway." Unfortunately, too many students believe such an attitude is the norm rather than an exception.

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Since faculty and students alike seem dubious about the process, are administrators likely to abandon these evaluations because of our, and our students', attitudes? The answer is NO, because the results are easily quantifiable; because, therefore, they provide a convenient tool for measuring a difficult-to-measure component of our professional lives, our teaching effectiveness; and because they DO give insight into our performance in the classroom. We <u>will</u> be evaluated by our students, and these evaluations <u>will</u> play some part in determining our salaries, our rank, and even in some cases our retention on the faculties of our various institutions.

However, as professionals we can use student evaluations to our advantage if we "stage a pre-emptive strike." In other words, if we stop viewing the evaluation process as something done TO us by administrators and cynical students and begin to see it instead as something that can be done FOR us, something that we can do for OURSELVES to improve the quality

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of the teaching and learning going on in our classrooms. A series of evaluations, administered to students for our own use throughout the semester before a final evaluation sent to the administration can help us to make mid-course corrections and to improve both our teaching and our evaluations.

Before we can accomplish such miraculous attitude changes, however, we must recognize that faculty evaluations serve two distinctly different purposes. Our administrators see them generally as summative: in other words, evaluations provide valid judgments of our work in the classroom upon which to base administrative decisions. But we must view them as formative, and we should use them as such--not just to "sum up", but to "form" and "INform" our teaching techniques. We must realize that, although students generally cannot judge our knowledge or subject mastery, they can give us information of value: they can provide their perceptions--of us, of our teaching methods, and of our attitudes. They certainly know when they feel encouraged to learn and when they do not. And since these perceptions, VALID OR NOT, significantly influence students' learning experiences, this information is vital to all professionals who are truly interested in the quality of their teaching.

Next, we must change our students' attitudes about the significance and purpose of their role in the evaluation process. We must convince them that we ARE interested in their perceptions and that we DO view them as active participants in the learning process, not just as passive vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge.

And, finally, we must develop a strategy to take the evaluation process into our own hands and, in so doing, to change it from a threat to an asset.

The first step in developing a strategy is to construct an evaluation instrument that is course-specific and that will allow us to gather the information we need to help us judge our unique strengths and weaknesses. Most universities use standardized evaluation forms which do not take into account the obvious differences between courses in technical writing and music appreciation. Such summative evaluation is impersonal and removes us from active participation in the evaluation process itself. It is done TO us, not FOR us. In short, in a time of increased accountability in education and increased need by administrators for hard data upon which to base personnel decisions, if we do not gather this data ourselves in a form that can be helpful to us in improving and documenting the quality of our teaching, it will generally be gathered for us in a less helpful and personal way.

Many of us shy away from the responsibility of formulating and initiating our own evaluations because of time constraints or because we feel we lack the necessary expertise. However, many universities now have faculty development offices which can and do provide support and information. Also, extensive research in faculty evaluation has been reported in the literature so that information is readily available to anyone interested in it. Additionally, an evaluation instrument need not be complex to be effective. It should, however, be as short as possible, it should be uncluttered, it should be phrased clearly and objectively, it should allow for written comments as well as structured responses, and it should address directly the student perceptions of professional performance the individual teacher wishes to investigate. (One may also choose to incorporate other methods of formative evaluation such as peer classroom observation by a trusted colleague and video-taping into the strategy if one wishes to do so. These can and do provide added insight into one's classroom effectiveness. Additionally, they can also serve to open an important cooperative dialogue about teaching methods and techniques between colleagues that can be mutually beneficial.)

The strategy I developed and first used profitably in a required first-semester freshman composition course involved constructing a series of three evaluation instruments which I used at the end of the fourth, eighth, and twelfth weeks. Since my university requires evaluation by department once a year, a fifteenth-week evaluation, the results of which go to the administration, might conclude the evaluation process. The first form elicits student perception in four specific areas: 1) understanding of course objectives and their relevance, 2) perception of organization and presentation of material, 3) attitudes toward grading and testing, and 4) perceptions of me as a teacher. The eighth and twelfth-week forms also use the same questions and format, although I add questions of a more summative nature in the final form. Many of the responses are not quantifiable; and, other than one question that asks students to grade the course, there is no attempt to compare me or my course to others. (See attached examples of these instruments.) Since I designed these forms to provide information for my use only, comparisons are unimportant. I especially try to encourage written responses, both in class explanations of the evaluation procedure as well as on the instrument itself, because they allow students to qualify their responses and, therefore, to make them more meaningful. For example, one student who indicated on the structured response that she might not recommend this course to a friend at first appeared to be registering a negative perception. However, when she qualified her response by commenting that the course was valuable but demanding and that she would definitely recommend it to a friend more

interested in learning than in making an easy A, her intent became obviously positive and completely clear.

The second step in the strategy requires that I commit myself to listening honestly to what my students have to say in the evaluation instruments, determining to use their perceptions to modify my teaching behaviors as necessary throughout the semester, and convincing my students that I seriously want to hear what they have to say.

The third step, implementing the strategy, isn't difficult. It begins during the first week of the semester, usually at the first class meeting when most teachers normally explain class procedures, content, and grading policies. I integrate into the usual first-day orientation a brief description of my plan to conduct periodic evaluation <u>for my use only</u> and of my intention to incorporate comments and suggestions into future class presentations. The key here is to convince the students that I really am interested in what they have to say about my role as a teacher, and that I really will use their comments in an observable way. A very brief statement of this information accompanies my printed course syllabus so that students will be able to review it and remember my plan for the evaluation.

Once they understand the plan, fifteen minutes at the conclusion of a class period is sufficient for students to record their responses and to leave them, unsigned, in a box at the classroom door as they exit. Most students who have participated in this process have provided extremely thoughtful comments once they become convinced that their input is truly valued.

Of course, logistics and instrument formulation are the easy parts of this strategy. The more difficult part is changing attitudes by 1) convincing students of one's sincere interest in their responses and by 2) considering all responses objectively and following through with changes in teaching behaviors if such change seems useful. Many students are cynical about the faculty evaluation process because of experiences similar to the one my student reported from last semester. And many of us are so comfortable in our teaching routines that any examination of our methods or any changes in the way we have "always done things" are extremely unsettling.

However, the benefits of taking the evaluation process into our own hands are well worth any risks or discomforts. First, through working to create a truly interactive relationship with our students in which we learn about and value their perceptions in the same way we expect them to learn about and value ours, we change both their attitudes and ours. Second, by changing attitudes, we create a classroom atmosphere conducive to better learning and teaching. And, finally, because of the changed attitudes and

atmosphere, students frequently see their experiences in our classes, and us as teachers, in a much more positive light--a reaction which significantly impacts the mandatory summative evaluations our administrators use in their salary, tenure, and retention decisions. Student evaluation of faculty need not be a threat; it truly can be an asset if we as teachers use it to improve our skills and to document our professional accomplishments in the classroom.

Margaret H. Davis
Baylor University
Waco, TX

Figure 1

SURVEY FORM A
English 1302 (Thinking and Writing)

Classes have now been in session a month, which has given you time to adjust to the newness of this course and to the academic expectations of this university. More adjustment may come before the semester ends, but for the present I am interested in what you have achieved up to this point. The answers you provide to the following questions will assist me in determining the effectiveness with which I have planned and taught this course thus far. Answering the questions may also help you to come to a better understanding of how you learn.

First, a comment and then a few questions about the purpose of this course:

My primary course objectives are 1) to develop your writing skills in expository and persuasive prose and 2) to increase your analytical reading and thinking skills through a study of expository, persuasive, and narrative prose. Your assigned readings, assignments, class projects, and discussions will, I hope, help you to achieve these goals.

Indicate on the scale below what your answer is to each question; and if you have a comment that would assist me in understanding how you approach these course objectives, please add that too.

1. Were the primary goals made clear to you?

Reasonably clear More or less clear I'm still confused

Comment:

2. Do you regard these goals as important to you?

Very important Important Fairly important Not important

Comment:

Now for some questions about what has been happening in class. Here again, indicate your answer to each question and add comments you feel would illustrate or clarify your answer.

3. Do you think you know more about writing now than you did before you began this course?

A good bit more About what I expected Not very much

Comment:

4. Do class discussions/assignments/handouts contribute to your understanding of course material?

Very helpful About average Not helpful

Comment:

5. Are tests a fair, sound measure of what you have learned?

Very much so Average Frustrating Poor

Comment:

6. Are writing assignments a fair, sound measure of what you have learned?

Very much so Average Frustrating Poor

Comment:

7. Is test/exercise grading fair?

Yes Maybe No

Comment:

8. Is grading of writing assignments fair?

Yes Maybe No

Comment:

9. Are you making the progress you feel you should in this course?

More than I expected Average Progress is slow

Comment:

10. What grade would you give this course at this time?

A B C D F

Comment:

11. What grade would you give me as a teacher at this time?

A B C D F

Comment:

Thank you for your help with this survey.

Figure 2

SURVEY FORM B
English 1302 (Thinking and Writing)

Several weeks ago you were kind enough to respond to a survey very similar to this one. Your views assisted me in clarifying the dynamics of the learning process; I hope expressing them did the same for you. Your responses to this form, now that you are well into the semester, will help to complete the picture and aid me in structuring the course to meet your needs and problems.

As you recall, the primary objectives of this course are to develop your writing skills and to increase your analytical reading and thinking skills. Through class discussions, readings, and other assignments, I hope you are achieving these goals.

Indicate on the scale below what your answer is to each question; and if you have a comment that will assist me in understanding your approach to course objectives, please add that too.

[The first eleven questions on this form duplicate Form A.]

12. Have your feelings toward this course changed since you completed the first survey at the end of the fourth week of the semester?

Much more positive	Positive	The same	More negative	Much more negative

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Comment:

Thank you for your help with this survey.

Figure 3

SURVEY FORM C
English 1302 (Thinking and Writing)

Attempts to make teaching as effective as possible require that we understand what happens in the mind and heart of the teacher and the learner. Since much of that work for this course is now nearly complete, you are in an excellent position to respond to the following questions about the learning you have experienced. Your responses to earlier surveys were attempts at interviews while the learning race was being run. This survey assumes that the race is complete, or nearly so.

Your honesty and candor in answering the questions have been of significant help to me, and your written comments have been especially useful. I hope you will continue to give me your honest, candid perceptions relative to the questions in this survey.

[The first twelve questions duplicate Form B.]

13. Could you list three or four important things you have learned in this course this semester?

14. What is your perception of my attitude toward the students in this class?

Supportive Sort of neutral Negative Other

Comment:

15. What is your perception of my attitude toward the subject?

Enthusiastic Positive Neutral A bit negative Negative

Comment:

16. On the basis of what you heard or thought before you signed up for this course, how hard was it compared to your expectations?

Much harder	Somewhat harder	Average	Easier	Much easier

Comment:

17. Would you like to take another course with me if there were room in your schedule?

Definitely	Yes	Maybe	No	Definitely no

Comment:

18. Would you recommend me to a friend for this course?

Definitely	Yes	Maybe	No	Definitely no

Comment:

19. What do you like most about this course?

20. What do you like least about this course?

21. What do you like most about me as a teacher?

22. What do you like least about me as a teacher?

Thank you for the time and thought you have given to this and to earlier surveys.